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THE CAUSES OF THE 1885 RESISTANCE

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Introduction

The 1885 battles between the Metis, Indians and the Canadian Government troops were an important part of Western Canada's history. These battles have become known as the Riel, or Northwest Rebellion.

There are a number of questions which I hope to address in this paper. First and foremost, was there really a rebellion in 1885 or was it merely a resistance by an oppressed people? Did the Metis actually rise in arms in hopes of defeating the Government troops or were they just another obstacle being pushed aside by the Macdonald government in order to fulfill its dream of opening the west?

There is also the question of who was to blame for the battles of 1885 and included in this is the question of what were the causes of the battles?

There is a general consensus among historians that there were four groups of people who played the major roles in the events leading up to the resistance. They were the Indians, Metis, settlers and the Canadian Government. Throughout the years, historians have developed a number of theories as to why the resistance of 1885 occurred. I will state the most common of these theories and show how they affected the people involved.

Though there are common factors, I intend to look at each of the four groups individually. I believe that this is one way to cover the reasons as to why and to what extent each participated in the events leading up to the resistance.

It is not the intent here to place the blame for the resistance on any one group of people in particular, but to give an opinion and a summary based on the facts as written by historians.

The theories of the 1885 resistance as stated by the most famous historians of Metis history tend to differ depending on the historian and also the year in which the theory was developed. A historian may upon the discovery of new evidence change this thought and develop a new theory completely unrelated to the previous one. The following are a number of these theories, and though they are not the only theories of the 1885 resistance, they are the most common.

Clash of Cultures

Donald Creighton and George F. Stanley both explained the rebellion and the general unrest in the North West in terms of a clash of cultures. The Metis and Indian populations were unable to assimilate into a more civilized and complex culture and they tried desperately to cling to their old ways of life; the rebellion was the "last gasp" of a dying way of life.

There has been much criticism of historians who view Metis and Indians as primitive people who block the advance of civilized society. According to Jim Brady:

It is the fashion of the Tory "historian" to repeat the slanders of the reactionaries of that day against the pioneers of the Great North West. Too often, even in Canadian history books, they are represented as savages, superstitious and criminal, blocking the advance of civilization of the West.¹

Class and Land

Class and land are very closely related and should be looked at together. Without land and land ownership there would be no basis for the theory of class and class differences.

It was the policy of the Canadian Government to take over the land occupied by Indians and Metis. They would then be in a position to move in immigrants to start farming and they could funnel all the profits to the East. This was the state of the class structure as it developed in the west before 1900.

The attempt to annex the West without so much as consulting its inhabitants was one of the first acts of a Canadian bourgeoisie newly in possession of its own federal state. The Dominion controlled by Montreal and Toronto businessmen, railway promoters, bankers, merchants and manufacturers contained the seeds of imperialism — and of monopoly.²

The Metis were never given title to land on which they had lived for years. This according to D.J. Hall was one of the main reasons for the resistance.

The failure to recognize the just claims of the mixed-blood population — then simply called the half-breeds — was one of the principle causes of the rebellion.³

Economics

This theory must be looked at individually as it concerned the Metis and the Indian in different ways. The buffalo was of common importance to both groups of people. It was their main food source.

The disappearance of the buffalo is thought to be of great importance in contributing to the participation of both the Indian and Metis in the resistance.

The decline of the Fur Trade was also of great importance because most of the people were involved in it either directly or indirectly.

The farming Indian and Metis fared no better as they were not equipped for the farming way of life. This livelihood ended up as almost a complete failure.

Louis Riel

Louis Riel is looked upon as one of the main reasons for the rebellion as he had both the ability and qualities to lead a people. He was also looked upon by the Metis as a savior in their time of need.

In the eyes of some historians Louis Riel was insane. Donald Creighton states:

The deterioration of Riel's character was very marked. In the fifteen years since he had left Red River, his megalomania had grown greater than ever. His ungovernable rages, delusions of grandeur, messianic claims, and dictatorial impulses had all become more extreme; but these violent excesses were not the only symptoms of his curious mental and moral decline. He had lost his shrewd appreciation of realities. His sense of direction was confused and his purposes were equivocal. He showed, at intervals, a cynical selfishness and ruthless stupidity.⁴

George Stanley believed Riel was insane, but for him it was Riel's charisma, dynamic personality and leadership abilities rather than his insanity that were of primary importance in contributing to the outbreak of rebellion.

The Canadian Pacific Railroad

Another theory for the cause of the resistance centers on the building of the railroad. This is a complex matter and will be dealt with further in the section on government.



Riel stopping Major Webb & his land surveyors. Gabriel Dumont Library
Governments Attempts to Colonize the West

In the 1870's the Canadian Government encouraged settlement in the West. They hoped to build the west into a thriving frontier with most of the benefits being funneled into Eastern Canada. It was the

Policy of Canadian Government was to create an internal colony of the west with the object being the exploitation of the wheat farmer to provide money to build Canadian Industry in the East.⁵

It was also the policy of the Government to strike treaties with the Indians to settle them on reserves so that land would become available for settlers.

Indians

In order to fully understand the conditions under which the Indians were living one must look to the Land Treaties that were established so that the Government could get the use of the land which rightfully belonged to the Indians.

The Indians did not fully understand what treaties meant. These treaties were always made to benefit the Government and it is believed that the Indians did not know that they were giving up ownership of their lands, but thought that they were merely allowing the white man to use it.

According to Stanley this misunderstanding was one of the main reasons for the Indian involvement in the resistance.

In the first place they were not really "negotiated" treaties in the proper sense of the word. The concessions granted to the Indians were never made in deference to the demands or wishes of the Indians. Discussion was confined to an explanation of the terms. The Indians could not change these terms; they were given only one power of acceptance or refusal. The fact is that the Indians never understood what was happening. They did not understand the legal concept of individual ownership in land. They appreciated the principle of usufruct; and many of the chiefs thought that they were yielding to the whites only the right to use the land, not the right of exclusive private ownership. It was this misunderstanding which lay behind Canada's only Indian rising which occurred in 1885 when several of the Indian Bands of the Saskatchewan valley joined the armed protest of the Metis.⁶

The loss of their land through the treaties was a reason for Indian unrest, however there were others. The disappearance of the buffalo in the late 1870's caused the Indians great hardship for as the buffalo disappeared so did Indian independence. The Indian could no longer depend on living off the land as they were accustomed to.

The Indians now living on reservations became dependent on Government rations for their food supply. The Government also hired agents to live on the reservations with the Indians to teach them how to farm. This would enable the Indian to supplement their food supply and in this way save the Government money as not so many rations would be needed.

This turning of the Indians into farmers did not work out

as successfully as the Government had hoped. The crops failed most of the time due to different elements of nature such as drought, prairie fire, and grasshoppers. It was also true that the Indian was not always taught the art of farming by the government agents. This same government agent often sold rations belonging to the Indians for their own profit. This led to hard times for the Indian and left them in a starving position. Thus it was written about the plight of the Indian that:

The withdrawal of the buffalo from the prairies brought destitution in its train. Throughout the North-West poverty, want, privation and distress reigned supreme. The Indians who remained in Canadian territory were faced with the spectre of famine.

The once intrepid hunters, and warriors were reduced to killing their horses and dogs, to feeding on gophers and mice, and even to picking over the putrid carcasses of dead and rotting animals. Almost anything, dead or alive, provided food for the wretched Indians.

The starving of the Indian may have been a planned action by the Canadian Government in order to maintain control of them. There was real anxiety that the Indian would not stand for this way of life for too long, some were afraid of what could happen if it continued for too long a period. This is shown by a letter to John A. Macdonald from Indian commissioner Edgar Dewdney when he writes that . . .

if the Government will only issue instructions to me, I will carry them out as far as I can, but I cannot on my own responsibility undertake to starve the Indian any more than we are now doing for they won't stand it and we have no force in the country sufficiently strong to make them.⁸

These then were the main reasons for the Indians joining the 1885 uprising. They had been forced to practise in a lifestyle that did not agree with them. They were a proud people who were used to being free and living a hunting life style. They did not like the life style of farmers and of being dependent on the government for their livelihood. Furthermore, the farmers life did not produce enough food for them. They were also cut back in rations. The Indian people were starving and they felt that they were being cheated out of their land. They struck back at the people who caused them this dilemma; the Canadian Government.



Buffalo Hunt, Public Archives of Canada.

The Metis

The Metis are the main group that historians focus on when discussing the 1885 resistance. They are the group that lead the resistance against the government. They were also the people the government were going to use to make an example out of and to exploit in order to maintain the Canadian government dream for the west.

The reasons for the Metis involvement in the 1885 resistance were complex and did not develop overnight. In fact the problems that led to Metis unrest developed over a lengthy period of time. In order to get an insight into Metis unrest, one has to look back to their early life style and means of livelihood.

The Metis were a unique group of people who fashioned a livelihood out of the opportunities at hand. The early Metis life style was based on the fur trade either directly or indirectly. Some of the Metis were involved in the actual harvest of the furs, while others worked directly for the fur companies.

The Metis were also businessmen. They were involved in the transportation business, as freighters of the Hudson's Bay Company goods and furs. They also hunted the buffalo and in this way produced food to sell. Other Metis were traders and in which case they traded directly with the trappers and then sold the furs at a profit thus acting as middlemen.

There were other businesses that the Metis were involved in. They were the spin off businesses of the fur trade and included such occupations as store keepers and blacksmiths.

The Metis were also a nomadic people who moved to where ever they could best make a living. They did settle on small homesteads and towns. However, they moved easily following the buffalo and business opportunities.

This life style began to change in the late 1870's and early 1880's. There were two main reasons for this change as shown in a letter from Lawrence Clarke to the Chief Commissioner of the Hudson's Bay Company.

They (the Metis) live by hunting and freighting. Their occupation as hunters was ended by the disappearance of the buffalo and there is not sufficient overland freighting going on in the country, to afford labour to a third of their number, hence they are getting poorer year by year.⁹

The Metis had to adapt to the change in economic lifestyles and began to settle on small farms in an attempt to eke out a living. The farming was done to produce food for their

own use as the Metis were unequipped and unskilled to produce for marketing.

Unlike the Indians, however the Metis were able to settle down on the land, grab a living out of the soil, growing a few potatoes, a little wheat and a little barley.¹⁰

The Metis petitioned the Canadian Government for assistance to establish themselves as farmers. One such petition read:

We humbly approach you today and beg you to help us. The help we implore is farming implements and seed to begin with. We want to settle and till the land, but we have no capital, nothing at all to start with.¹¹

The Canadian government did nothing to help the Metis establish the farms that they wanted as this was not what they had in mind for the land or the Metis. The Metis therefore, continued to live on small farms and small communities around these farms. The land that they settled was divided in the river lot system. This was done because the river was used for transportation and irrigation.

The Metis also requested title or ownership of the land that they were settled on. They had been living on the land for years and had fulfilled all the government requirements to obtain a patent. The requests were not answered. Instead the Canadian Government implemented another system of survey called the township system.

This system was imposed by the government in order to make the territory an agriculture frontier. This system of survey caused the Metis more grief, and insecurity as stated by Stanley:

Another source of insecurity among the mixed blood population was to be found in the system of survey imposed upon the Metis settlements. In the North West the Metis, as at Red River, took up their land in long narrow strips running back a mile or two from the river. In this way they were able to preserve the community life upon which their society was based. The attempt to impose an unfamiliar and, to the Metis, unsatisfactory system of survey, and thus deprive them of their river frontages and destroy their village community life, invited armed resistance. The fear of losing their lands had been one of the principle causes of the Metis disturbance at Red River in 1869-70. The cause of the rising on the Saskatchewan was similar. In both instances the township survey proved to be a direct cause of general feeling of insecurity . . .¹²



Metis traders, Public Archives of Canada.

The Metis not only did not get to keep their Riverfront lots but were also being forced to pay for the land on which they had settled for years.

The Metis people also felt that they were entitled to land scrip as they did not receive any such scrip in Manitoba. The government again refused to act on any of their demands. The grievance of land and land claims was to be one of the biggest concerns of the Metis. These were a just demand as stated by Stanley:

The justice of the Metis cannot but be admitted. They were the first settlers in the North-West Territories. Some had abandoned their nomadic life even before 1872 and squatted upon small plots of land. Others settled at a later date. In these instances the Metis considered it a grievance to be obliged to enter their holdings as homesteads and wait until the expiration of three

years for their patents.¹³

Thus the failure of the Government to deal with the Metis on their land issues, along with the loss of their economic independence caused great hardships for them and can be attributed to as the direct causes of Metis Resistance in 1885.

The failing of their crops due to varying climatic reasons caused the Metis to enter into a state of starvation. The entire way of life had been changed by the government and the sudden progress of the west. The government was unwilling to help them and in fact the Metis were being used as a pawn in the government policy to open and exploit the West.

The Metis knew they had to get organized in order to deal with this government. They needed a strong leader who knew how to deal with the government, hence they invited Louis Riel back to Canada to help them solve their problems.

The Settlers

The difficulties that the settlers faced were not nearly as great as those faced by the Indian and Metis people. They were not in a state of starvation or in a life endangering situation. They did, however have many serious problems or grievances with the Canadian Government. These grievances stemmed around the issues of land, the marketing of products, transportation, freight and tariff rates and the question of provincial status.

The settlers, along with the other people who were residing in the Prince Albert area, wanted the Canadian Government to give them provincial status.

The reasons for this were stated as follows:

With our own local legislature, we could look after and provide a proper system of education for our people, remodel our judicial system, provide for the making and improvement of our roads and bridges, and generally manage our own internal affairs.¹⁴

The Canadian Government refused to grant this as with provincial status the province would become the owner of the natural resources which in this case meant the land; the Canadian Government had other plans for the land.

The settlers also had grievances with the methods of the Canadian Government in regards to issuing patents and deeds of land ownership. It was Canadian Government regulations that after three years of settling and working a piece of land, title would be issued. This was not happening as the Canadian Government was in no hurry to issue land deeds and found methods with which to delay these proofs of ownership.

The issue of marketing was of greater importance. The settlers would sell their grain to Eastern Canada. They would receive low payments for their produce, and what is more important they would have to pay high prices for items that they purchased from Eastern Canada.

The transportation and freight issues were closely related. It was the intention of the Canadian Government to build a railroad to the Prince Albert area. This was one of the main reasons that this area was settled. However this was not done because it was later realized that this would interfere with the original Canadian Pacific Railway (C.P.R.).

The C.P.R. freight rates led to further unrest among the Prince Albert settlers, not only were they being paid too little for their produce but they were also being charged dearly for the carrying or transportation of their produce to the markets in the East.

The government also had a tariff system in place which forced the settlers to deal in Eastern Canada for those wares which were not available in the West. They could get better prices and cheaper deals from the Americans, however, they would have to pay a tariff or duty on those items not bought in Canada. This tariff would push the price up so that it made the product more expensive than those available from Eastern Canada.

These grievances combined with an economic depression in 1882 led the farmers to unite in order to deal with the government. Thus settlers unions were formed.

These settlers unions began to petition the government with demands for action on their demands. They also recognized that the settlers and Metis had many common troubles and grievances. This led them to work together to try to correct them. There were, as a result, many petitions sent to Ottawa.

The Canadian Government did not take any action to rectify these problems so further action had to be taken. The settlers like the Metis lacked a strong leader who could unite them in order to work together for their common interests. They (the settlers) along with the Metis decided that they would invite Louis Riel to join them. With Louis Riel leading them they became united and again began petitioning the government.

In December of 1884, a petition of rights was drawn up by the Metis and Prince Albert Settlers union. The demands were to benefit all three oppressed parties, the Metis, Indian and the settlers. However they were never acted upon by the Canadian Government.

Among the demands were more liberal treatment of the Indians, scrip and patents for the Metis, patents to those who had occupied land prior to 1872 and to those who had satisfied the requirements of the Dominion Lands Act, provincial status for the Territories, federal political representation in the House of Commons and Senate, control of their own natural resources, reduction of the tariff, a railroad to Hudson's Bay and vote by secret ballot.¹⁵

The government on seeing the united front of the Metis and settlers decided that something had to be done to divide them. This was done by giving small concessions to the settlers. These concessions included lower freight rates, granting of land and issue of ownership titles and the provision for elected members from the Northwest Council.

These concessions were probably the real reason that the settlers did not participate in the battles of the resistance.



Canadian troops, Public Archives of Canada.

The Canadian Government

The Canadian Government led by John A. Macdonald had developed a national policy in 1876.

This policy incorporated the following ideas (a) protective tariffs (b) the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway to the Pacific Ocean and (c) settlement of the west.¹⁶

These three items are what eventually led to opposition by the Metis, Indians and settlers in the west. Therefore the building of the C.P.R. led to the armed resistance of 1885. John A. Macdonald had had a dream for a National Canada and he would let nothing come between him and his dream.

The first step in this policy was to clear the west for settlers. In order to do this the Indians and Metis had to be dealt with. The Indians were taken care of by getting them to sign treaties, and by placing them on reservations, therefore making them dependent on government handouts in order to survive.

The Metis were a different matter. They did not sign

treaties. They did, however, settle on farms and ask for help from the government in order to be able to start farming. They also formulated other demands such as self-government and ownership of land. These requests were never acted upon as this is not what the government had in mind for the West.

The Government's policy for the West was to make it available for settlers and immigrants in order that the West be opened for farming and become a market for eastern industrial products. Farm produce from the west could be transported to Eastern Canada. In turn, the people of the West would be needing materials and goods in order to survive. These goods would be made in Eastern Canada and sold to the Westerners. From this, the established economy in Eastern Canada would be able to exploit the West. Furthermore, in order that goods and materials were not purchased from outside Canada the Government levied large tariffs on goods bought from other countries.

The Government needed a dependable form of transport-



Laying track, S.P.A.

ation in order to make the dream of a National Canada a reality. This form of transportation turned out to be the Canadian Pacific Railroad. The C.P.R. was to be a link between East and West.

The Conservative Government of John A. Macdonald attempted to build the railroad. They, however, gave up on the idea and the building of the railroad was turned over to a

Syndicate incorporated by Dominion Statute in 1881 as the Canadian Pacific Railway Company.¹⁷

The Government gave the syndicate a lot of assistance ...

Another point to be emphasized is that the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway was in fact a joint achievement of the Canadian Pacific Railway Company and the Canadian Government. The extensive assistance given to the Company by the government included \$25 million and 25 million acres of agricultural land "fairly fit for settlement"; land for right of way, sidings, and structures; substantial exemptions from taxes and duties; and a twenty-year guarantee against certain

competitive construction in the West. In addition the government agreed to complete those sections of the railway which it had already under construction in 1881, and to transfer them to the Company on completion, without equipment, but without cost to the Company.¹⁸

Even with this help from the Government the railroad syndicate ran out of money. More money was given by the Government in 1880. However, by 1885 the railroad syndicate was again bankrupt. The government could no longer put any more money into the railroad due to the public outcry against more government subsidies to the C.P.R.

The national dream of John A. Macdonald's government was at a stand still. The Government had to find a way to give the railroad more money. What better way than the fomenting of an armed resistance by the people of Western Canada. The railroad could then be used to bring in troops and could the public refuse the railroad more money after it had saved the country by transporting the troops necessary to put down the resistance.

Conclusion

The main cause of the resistance appears to be centered around the land question. The reason for this was the government had different plans for its usage than the Indian and Metis people had. The land had to be taken from the Indian and Metis at any cost if the Government was to fulfill its national dream.

The Government was in a position to help the western people through their troubled times, however they chose to ignore the starvation and other problems. The reason for this was they were more interested in the welfare of the eastern economy than the people of the West.

The people of the west were going through such a troubled life and time that they began to protest and when they were given no satisfactory solution or help from the government they were left with no other alternative than to do their own organizing to change their fortunes. Thus they called in Louis Riel.

The Canadian Pacific Railroad was the biggest factor in the 1885 Resistance. The Canadian Government wanted it built at any cost, so the lives of a few Indian and Metis people would not matter to them. It is the feeling of many that the resistance was started by the government in order to justify more grants to the railway which they needed to fulfill their national dream. It will probably be a proven fact in the near future that the Government did in fact incite the resistance. The Metis, Indian and settlers were merely pawns in the government's policy for the west.

Footnotes

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3. D.J. Hall, *The Half-Breed Claims Commission*
4. Donald Creighton, *Canada's First Century* (Toronto, 1976), p. 54.
5. Vernon c. Fowke, *The National Policy and the Wheat Economy* (Toronto, 1978)
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7. George Stanley, *The Birth of Western Canada* (Toronto, 1978), p. 224
8. Edgar Dewdney, *Dewdney Papers*, Vol. 21B, Section 3
9. *Half-Breed Petitions (1873-1885)*, Vol. 14S, Section 22
10. Stanley, *Louis Riel*, (Toronto 1972), p. 258
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17. Fowke (1978) p. 27
18. *Ibid.*, p. 48



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